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Heresiology: The invention of 'heresy' and 'schism'

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Heresiology was the combative theological genre for asserting true Christian doctrine through hostile definition and ecclesiastical exclusion. In the fourth to sixth centuries the union of Christian orthodoxy with Roman political power can easily seem to modern eyes to be a bad match. Emperors peeved by the inability of religious practitioners to come to an enforceable consensus for the protection of the state worked with bishops increasingly polarised by local traditions and civic unrest in a high stakes game of imperial orthodoxy. The unprecedented Roman imperial legislation on religious dissent was entwined with the general expansion of bureaucracy and law in the later empire. In this political context heresy was increasingly no longer only an ecclesiastical matter or a serious theological challenge, but a problem of public safety since correct belief and worship ensured the unity and stability of society. Heresiological categories were often a means to establish or maintain common boundaries. The development of creeds and imperial law, however, was matched by an increasing theological and political complexity so that conflicts in at least North Africa, Syria and Egypt persisted due to regional concerns and local theological traditions.

The literary genre of heresiology shifted in this era as older Christian sectarian structures gave way to ecumenical councils and increasingly sophisticated theological definitions. Heresiology can be read as the political claim of an exclusive ideology made through the demonisation, exclusion and silencing of 'the other'. Ironically, this can simply be the negative reading of the apologetic historical narrative that presented an evolutionary orthodox core that was defended from incursions.[1] Actual historical practice did not match the analytical clarity of this binary category. Rather than merely a defensive

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[1] Compare R. Lim's largely political analysis of a dogmatic Christianity in *Public disputation, power, and social order in late antiquity* to J. Pelikan's apologetic in *The emergence of the catholic tradition*. A. Cameron discusses these problems in 'How to read heresiology'.

declaration of established belief or power, heresiology reveals the creative theological definitions and social anxieties involved in a continual construction of ancient Christian identity. Rhetorical techniques such as labelling or genealogies and literary genres such as cultural histories or intellectual catalogues can be examined in historical context to reveal not only social or religious attempts at expulsion, but also theological negotiation with contemporary cultural problems of multiplicity and difference in Roman society. Ecclesiastical unity and doctrinal clarity were to be achieved as much as defended. The increasing classification of error therefore reflected the dynamism of the theological tradition as well as the general codification of Roman life and thought during the later empire.

Genres of disputation and identity in late antiquity

Heresiology developed in the first three centuries as a Christian literary discourse to define and refute theological error as a means of ensuring correct belief and exclusive identity. Like many products of late antiquity it was a hybrid of various local cultural and religious traditions that had been placed in dialogue by the unified Roman empire; the authors of the Second Sophistic, for example, argued for Hellenism as the ancient universal tradition.[2] Linking the biblical images of demonically inspired false prophets to the succession of teachers which underlay the integrity of the philosophical schools, Justin Martyr in second-century Rome began to use the neutral term for sect or choice (*hairesis*) as a demonic label for Christian error: 'heresy'. The labelling of opponents as erroneous or innovative and the construction of genealogies to show their illegitimate successions were acknowledged means of debate in Hellenic culture. However, the uniting of demonic inspiration with doctrinal error created the sharp spiritual and apocalyptic boundary between truth and 'heresy' by Justin in his *Apology* and continued by Irenaeus of Lyon in *Against all heresies*; this theological category mirrored of course the high religious and sociological boundaries of their early sectarian communities. Saving belief could not be a neutral choice. Those whose choices or communities were different were literally demonised. The image of the 'heretic' was further cast rhetorically in a combination of immoral charges (deceptive, unfaithful, duplicitous and promiscuous) as well as social violations

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2 See G. Bowersock, *Hellenism in late antiquity*; Tim Whitmarsh, *Greek literature and the Roman empire*.

(superstitious, elitist, social climbing, plagiarist, rebellious). These literary strategies of pejorative and excluding labels, immoral charges, and demonic and therefore external genealogies became the foundation in Christian thought and life for categorising theological opponents.[3] These negative images highlighted starkly the saving authenticity of apostolic succession, true doctrine as unchanging, and the community as essentially unified. The later development of handbooks of heresies or the diptychs of holy ancestors were the expansion and public codification of these early individual polemical techniques. As we will discuss below, problems developed in these later comprehensive handbooks since they now included, or the diptychs now excluded, ancestors who in earlier genealogies or local contexts had been considered orthodox.

The development of central institutions of theological and imperial authority in the fourth to sixth centuries transformed the sectarian practices of Christian unity and diversity. No central institution or political process had existed to regulate belief before the fourth century, but rather communication among local communities created webs of theological and ecclesiastical consensus. Given the geographical diversity of Christianity, doctrinal variations were inherent, if gradually regulated by literature that established common beliefs and emerging boundaries; Irenaeus noted over an argument on the dating of Easter, 'Our diversity in the fast confirms our agreement in the faith.'[4] Local tradition was rooted in genealogies and practices from earliest missionaries, and often defensively defined in controversy with others such as the conflict on baptism between Cyprian of Carthage and Stephen of Rome. From the fourth century on, theological controversies were public and often lengthy, punctuated by new representative councils called and enforced by emperors. They also involved powerful urban bishops, sometimes several to a city, as representatives of local traditions rather than individual house church leaders or teachers engaged in mainly literary battles. Not surprisingly, lasting theological consensus was slow to be achieved, politically as well as theologically, due both to the complexity of questions concerning God and salvation, and the difficulty of fully reconciling different theological traditions. Bishops on the defensive appealed to their own inherited local faith, refusing to be placed in a hostile doctrinal genealogy: 'We have neither been followers of Arius (because how should we who are bishops follow a presbyter?) nor have we accepted any other form of faith than that which was set out at the

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3 A. Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie*.
4 Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.24.13; see also Caroline Bammel, 'Peacemaking and religious tolerance in the early church' and R. Williams, 'Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?'

beginning . . .'[5] Heresiology as an aggressive language of conflict was used deliberately for calculated effect, and for constructing borders to give meaning to compromised and often still volatile centres of definition.

Rhetorically, this unified diversity of apostolic teaching inside the tradition was also made through the boundaries against 'outside' religious traditions as Christian debates over legitimate succession and authentic teaching were consciously positioned within the cultural debates concerning antiquity and universality in ancient religion and society. Thus, the condemnations of Judaism as 'outmoded' and philosophy as 'multiple' or 'human' were means to define Christianity as the only legitimate representative of the sole transcendent truth, even if it obviously contained aspects of these traditions. Associating a heresy with traits of Judaism or Hellenism, if at times appropriate in exegetical debate, rhetorically marginalised opponents within the community, and increasingly reinforced a singular and universal truth revealed only in Christianity. Thus Christianity, in essence, according to Eusebius, was neither Jewish nor Hellenist, but the primary origin of both, so that one could see prefigurements of Christianity in traditional Mediterranean literature; in contrast Epiphanius argued that Judaism and Hellenism were not incomplete traditions, but heresies opposed to the one truth of Christianity. John of Damascus added Islam to the list of heresies as a result of the later invasions.[6] In spite of the eloquent defence of Hellenism by Celsus, Porphyry and Julian, Christianity defined itself as the only legitimate religious tradition by its antiquity and universality. This transcendence and antiquity therefore enabled some legitimate use and synthesis with these traditions; imbalance, however, would result in heresy. Heresiology was an argument about religious assimilation and authority in the larger Roman context as well as an internal argument concerning theological formulae.[7]

The Nicene controversy

The Nicene controversy lasted over sixty years and resulted in the fundamental re-structuring of Christian theology and ecclesiastical authority through creeds and councils. Historians would no longer contrast an implicit orthodoxy

5 For the letter that accompanied the Creed of Antioch (341), see R. Hanson, *The search for the Christian doctrine of God*, 285. See also the protests of Western bishops at being associated with Arius, ibid., 123–5.

6 On Eusebius and Epiphanius, see A. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews*, 44–8; D. Boyarin, *Border crossings*, 205–6; D. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*.

7 On apologetics and heresiology, see H. Inglebert, *Les romains chrétiens* and R. Lyman, 'The politics of passing'.

to heresy in the complex debates of this century, but rather trace the gradual emergence of a new articulation of incarnation and Trinity over several generations of theological debate. The origins of the controversy were a local theological conflict in Alexandria in 318–20 between a presbyter, Arius, and his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria. Both claimed to be authentic representatives of tradition in their description of the origin of the Son from the Father: Arius objected to the bishop's apparent carelessness in blurring the distinction of natures between the Father and the Son by his emphasis on eternal generation, whereas Alexander accused Arius of denying the divinity of the Son. Both used heresiological categories to give a negative boundary to the theological formula they were trying to define, rejecting Gnostic, Manichaean or Sabellian formulae; all these labels had currency in the history of Christian controversy in Egypt.[8] Positive theological teaching was therefore shaped and assembled by the array of negative labels. These labels were also applied to each other as Alexander accused Arius of being 'Jewish' and 'Greek' in his thought, and denied that his own theology was 'Sabellian'.[9] Although Constantine responded to the conflict as a minor philosophical dispute among teachers who should compromise for the sake of imperial peace, the opponents went on to build alliances based on teaching genealogies and apostolic truth. Not surprisingly, the Council of Nicaea also worked largely in negative terms. The short formula defending the eternal unity of the Father and Son included *homoousios*, a suspect and little-known term, largely to exclude Arius who had already repudiated it; the creed also for the first time included anathemas in order to define and to legislate unacceptable theological formulae.[10]

As the controversy continued Arius as a historical person was rapidly discarded, but as a polemical category he became the eternal archetype for any teaching which denied the essential divinity of the Son. After Arius' sudden death in 336, Athanasius attached the theology, and therefore the genealogy, of Arius to opponents of Nicaea as a means of discrediting them. 'Arians' as a coherent heretical group were created for future historiography, though their only commonality was non-acceptance of Nicaea.[11] The construction of the heretical system followed the older rules of accusing a doctrine of demonic origin, philosophical speculation, and the association with outsiders

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8 See Arius' letter to Alexander (ed. Opitz, *Urkunde* 6). On Gnostic Christianity in Egypt and the controversy with Dionysius over charges of 'Sabellianism', see Hanson, *The Search for the Christian doctrine of God*, 190–3; R. Lyman, 'Arians and Manichees on Christ'.
9 Letter of Arius to Alexander 4 and 46 (ed. Opitz, *Urkunde* 14).
10 O. Skarsaune, 'A neglected detail in the Creed of Nicaea (325)'.
11 M. Wiles, 'Attitudes to Arius in the Arian controversy'.

to the tradition. The motivations and styles of orthodox heresiologists range from the adamant demonisation of any dissent from Alexander's Nicene Creed by Athanasius to Cyril of Jerusalem, who defined orthodoxy as the middle ground between theological extremes of adoptionism and Sabellianism.[12] Equally important, the arguments with 'Arius' opened new theological debates with Marcellus of Ancyra or Apollinarius whose attack on 'Arianism' was viewed to be inadequate from other sides; Sabellianism continued to be a potent label in the East for those defending the essential unity of Father and Son.[13] Polemically, the claims of 'simplicity' and 'scripture' emerged to distance oneself from the image of contentious philosophical disputes, except that all sides claimed to follow ancient apostolic tradition, correct interpretation of scripture and asceticism; indeed more was held in common than disputed, which ironically lent added virulence to the discussion of differences.[14] Basil of Caesarea attempted to distinguish the divisions with an increased vocabulary of schism and heresy, noting that many factions were separated by issues of discipline or leadership rather than doctrine; one needed to proceed cautiously at such a complex time.[15] Finally, the control of popular or public participation became a new concern as urban factions supported various sides of the debate; charges of disorder or violence became important weapons to gain imperial favour.[16]

Nicene orthodoxy gradually arrived through the theological compromises of Athanasius at Alexandria in 362 and the enforcement of the Nicene formula by Theodosius at Constantinople in 381. Enjoying widespread authority as the definitive Christian statement, Nicaea was no longer received as a short defensive statement of faith, but was accepted as a universal confession setting forth positive definitions of divine nature and activity. The condemnation of theological teachings or persons now fixed by legislation and enforced by emperors gave increasing social potency to these literary images of 'heresy'. The boundaries of religion in earlier Roman law had been marked by categories of magic and superstition.[17] Although some heresies followed this classification – the Eunomians for example were linked with magic – the development reflected a scale of harm with, therefore, appropriate penalties. The Eunomians lost social status and property, but they were neither executed nor exiled as in later

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12 R. Lyman 'A topography of heresy'.
13 J. Lienhard, 'Basil of Caesarea, Marcellus of Ancyra and "Sabellius"'.
14 R. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene revolution*, 100f.
15 W. Löhr, 'Schisma'.
16 T. Gregory, *Vox populi*.
17 The legislation on heresy is collected in *CTh* 16; see further K-L. Noethlichs, *Die gesetzgeberischen Massnahmen der christlichen Kaiser* and Caroline Humfress, 'Roman law'.

Christian history. However, 'Christian' was a name reserved for the orthodox only, and contemporary heretics were externalised by being linked by name and succession to the traditional genealogies of error.

The final enduring legacy of the Nicene crisis was the evocation of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan creed at Chalcedon in 451, and its continuing use on all sides of the Christological controversies as a sign of traditional orthodoxy. Although the Nicene Creed had been sufficient, new heresies of the fourth century had called for the expansion of the creed during the contemporary controversies; those who rejected Chalcedon showed their orthodoxy by placing the Nicene Creed within worship for the first time.[18] By the sixth century, the Nicene Creed was used for school exercises by children.[19]

Problematic ancestors and catalogues of error

If councils were setting new universal parameters for the local churches through the actions of bishops, the establishment of doctrinal norms inevitably revealed 'heresy' past and present. Epiphanius, writing during the bitter divisions of Christians in Antioch over the Christological errors of Apollinarius, once a defender of Nicaea, and reflecting the doctrinal multiplicity he had encountered in the desert, insisted that only the orthodox faith of the church was the antidote to the varied poisons of heresy in his encyclopaedic heresiology, *Panarion* or 'The medicine box': 'I shall be telling you the names of the sects and exposing their unlawful deeds like poisons and toxic substances, matching the antidotes with them at the same time – cures for those who are already bitten and preventatives for those who will have this experience.'[20] As Martha Nussbaum notes, medical arguments are concerned with health and restoration: truth is already known, and then applied to the patient by the professional.[21] As mentioned above, Epiphanius' encyclopaedia offered a classification of all traditions outside Christianity as 'heresies', as well as genealogies and theological refutations. Significantly, he included contemporary figures that were known by contemporary standards to have shifted from orthodoxy to error, such as Apollinarius or Origen. In the totalising view of Epiphanius, external and internal error had been collapsed into one opposition to saving

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18 H. Chadwick, 'Orthodoxy and heresy from the death of Constantine'; A. de Halleux, 'La réception du symbole œcuménique'; P. Gray, *The Defence of Chalcedon in the East.*
19 Papyrus *O.Heid.Inv.* 419, in P. Garnsey and C. Humfress, *The evolution of the late antique world*, 134.
20 Epiphanius, *Panarion, proem* 1; A. Pourkier, *L'hérésiologie chez Épiphane.*
21 M. Nussbaum, *The therapy of desire*, 494–6. On medical images in Epiphanius, see R. Lyman, 'Origen as ascetic theologian'.

truth, i.e., heresy. Heresy was both external opposition and a lurking internal poison within the tradition in seemingly holy men.[22]

Epiphanius signalled a new level of encyclopaedic classification of heresiology.[23] Handbooks of error would be created and copied in order to summarise and control theological diversity, echoing the emerging canon law. Thus, Epiphanius was shortened to *Anakephalaios* at the end of the fourth century; later Latin handbooks included Filastrius of Brescia, Augustine's *De haeresibus* in 428, and the anonymous *Praedestinatus* (432). Gennadius of Marseille wrote *Adversus omnes haereses* at the end of the fifth century. In the East such works also expanded Epiphanius to address new divisions in the church over Chalcedon as well as the emergence of Manichees and Islam. John of Damascus therefore expanded the *Anakephalaios* to one hundred heresies. New cultural movements were placed within the genealogies of the original truth and error.

Needless to say, this stark literary umbrella of classification did not regulate all conflicts that proceeded with theological synthesis and astute negotiation. As shown by Elizabeth Clark, the controversy over Origen of Alexandria blended ecclesiastical ambition, ascetic practices, social networks and theological issues.[24] If speculative, Origen's spiritual and theological writings were widely circulated; no less a figure than Athanasius had quoted him in favour of Nicene orthodoxy, and Anthony and the Cappadocians had drawn on his teachings for ascetic practice. The attack on Origen as an allegoriser included fears that his spiritual exegesis undercut the transformation of the body so essential to practising ascetics as well as signalling a new control of exegesis in line with church practice. Focusing on Nicene orthodoxy as well as scriptural translation and ascetic practice, the controversy in the fourth century engaged Jerome, the influential biblical scholar and one-time admirer of Origen, Theophilus of Alexandria, and Epiphanius. Socrates, the later church historian, portrayed Epiphanius as a simple-minded, if pious, meddler; he was criticised for his lack of understanding of local conditions as well as his harsh judgment of theological ancestors.[25] Basil of Caesarea likewise warned him about the breadth of understanding within orthodoxy itself.[26] Epiphanius presented orthodoxy as a matter of public safety with the necessity of policing both the internal conscience as well as the external boundaries. In practice, not everyone agreed;

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22 R. Lyman, 'The making of a heretic'.
23 W. Löhr, 'Catalogues of heretics'.
24 Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist controversy*.
25 Socrates, *H.E.* 6.10. The events in Constantinople are discussed by Jon Dechow in *Dogma and mysticism in early Christianity*, 408–13.
26 Basil, *Letter* 258.3; see Philip Rousseau's comments in his *Basil of Caesarea*.

with escalating consequences polemics could be a delicate tool as well as a potent weapon.[27] However, the practice of condemning theological ancestors to ensure contemporary definitions would be an important practice in the continuing construction of imperial orthodoxy.

Local traditions and imperial consensus

The conflicts of the fourth century bequeathed a system of imperial enforcement of ecclesiastical councils to a religious community geographically and culturally divided. For the first time in Roman law, religious dissent was classified and ordered. Appeals to antiquity and the apostolic succession of the episcopacy, as well as pilgrimage, shrines and liturgical traditions, strengthened not only the larger religion of Christianity, but the local incarnation of it. In the fifth century in particular, the Donatist controversy and the Miaphysites in the East reflected the strength of local practices and traditions that were not easily dislodged by councils or imperial edicts. Ironically, the councils and edicts in fact could work to further define and cement local practice in opposition to its being perceived as 'heresy' by the larger church.

The Donatist controversy had ebbed and flowed from the early fourth century in North Africa to the fifth century. Rooted in particular African traditions as well as clerical scandals surrounding the community of Carthage during the last imperial persecution of 303, the conflict between a 'true' church and a 'contaminated' church resounded in earlier writings of Tertullian and Cyprian and the unresolved conflict with Stephen of Rome. Within the geographical diversity of ancient Christianity, the indigenous tradition of a church whose sacraments and identity were inviolate and singular had never been challenged. Labelled as 'Donatists' (after their leader Donatus) and portrayed as 'purists' and 'rigorists', these North Africans in fact represented the biblical and apocalyptic legacy of Cyprian and Tertullian. They believed the identity of the church itself as the place of the Holy Spirit was compromised by the apostasy of the believers.[28]

The violence of the Donatist controversy was an ironic echo of the fervency of the church of the age of persecution. Like Athanasius, they accepted imperial power when the ruling was in their favour, otherwise in their eyes the state simply continued the persecution of the earlier pagan rulers. The broad support in the countryside and the criticism of wealth also reveal significant

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27 R. Lyman, 'Ascetics and bishops'; S. Elm, 'The dog that did not bark'.
28 M. Tilley, *The Bible in North Africa*.

differences between the new imperial, universal church and local sectarian traditions; the work of Tyconius and Augustine on the mixed nature of the saving community reveals sociological as well as theological strains in North Africa.[29] As seen in the arguments about theological ancestors, distinctions had to be made about new divisions within the imperial church. The continuity, strength and intimacy of the conflict led Augustine to revise inherited categories of 'heretic' to conclude that the Donatists were not heretics, but rather 'schismatics' since they were divided from the church not by doctrinal error, but by lack of charity or discipline; Jerome argued that schismatic divisions eventually led into error and heresy.[30] For some Donatists fear of assimilation to a corrupted church and loyalty to their own tradition prevented lasting compromise. The imperial coercion of the movement after the Council of Carthage in 411 made it a minority, but did not erase the movement itself.

Local traditions and violence also haunted the continuing Christological controversies of the Eastern church. The ecclesiastical rivalries of Alexandria and Constantinople that had earlier involved a skirmish between Theophilus and John Chrysostom broke out in open doctrinal war between Cyril and Nestorius. Cyril's passionate defence of the Alexandrian piety of the one enfleshed Logos could unfortunately seem to embrace the problems of the mixture of divine and human natures earlier condemned in Apollinarius; the one nature formula was in fact drawn from an Apollinarian forgery, attributed to Athanasius. Schooled in the 'two natures' Christology of the Antiochene tradition, Nestorius became bishop at Constantinople with a passion to defend the true faith from heresy, suppressing an Arian church and attempting to correct the popular devotional term 'theotokos' for fear of its association with paganism. If impatient with theological error, Nestorius distinguished between those simply confused, and those belonging to certain heretical labels such as Arian or Manichaean.[31] In the ensuing conflict opponents of Nestorius such as Eusebius and Cyril contrasted his teachings to Paul of Samosata to show their similarity; Cyril even advised the people not to obey a heretical bishop.[32]

The attempted resolution of these two great traditions resulted in a compromise, but only after the deposition and exile of Nestorius following the

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29 W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*; R. Markus, *Saeculum*, 105–26.
30 Löhr, 'Schisma'; W. Löhr, 'Pelagius' Schrift *De natura*'.
31 On Nestorius' zeal see Socrates, *H.E.* 7.21 and P. Allen, 'The use of heretics and heresies'. The tactics of the dispute are described in Gregory, *Vox populi*, 81–127.
32 H. M. Sillett outlines the progressive labelling of Nestorius as a 'heretic' with a 'school' in *Culture of controversy*, 5–56.

Council of Ephesus in 431. The theology of conciliation at Chalcedon in 451 that attempted to combine the Christological insights of both Alexandria and Antioch, however, was not universally received in the Eastern church, even with appeal to the revered Nicene Creed. Orthodox interpretation of Chalcedon was therefore defended by genealogies of saintly or demonic theologians. Cyril had compiled a florilegium to show how incarnation should be understood as well as a means of validation for a particular understanding of the past.[33] In response Theodoret defended the Antiochene ancestors Diodore and Theodore in his *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*. Significantly, he shifted away from the polemical model of genealogy, and argued that conflict as well as give and take were necessary processes for the discernment of truth.[34]

These opposing collections of florilegia were exercises in local genealogy as well as showing the continuing strength of orthodoxy resting on geographical and chronological breadth. However, in the East Christianity remained divided by region and theology with the Miaphysite churches of Egypt, Armenia and Syria rejecting the Chalcedonian formula of imperial orthodoxy. In 543–4, the emperor Justinian anathematised Theodore of Mopsuestia and his writings, certain writings of Theodoret of Cyrus, and the letter of Ibas to Maris in the 'Three Chapters' controversy.[35] This edict was an attempt to reassure Miaphysites of Chalcedon's orthodoxy by condemning Antiochene theologians who were associated with Nestorius. This was not successful in the East – particularly among the East Syrians[36] as well as the Egyptians – and provoked a crisis with the pope, who rejected this move as critical of Rome's defence of two natures. Ironically, this was partly to distract attention from Justinian's condemnation of Origen as interpreted through a later ascetic theologian, Evagrius. However, Origen was also condemned *post mortem* in 553 by the Fifth Ecumenical Council. Lists of saints and heresiarchs therefore shored up the boundaries of theological discourse as well as defining ecclesiastical community. Equally importantly, heresiological labels were also attached to both sides of the dispute on Chalcedon, including 'Nestorian' for the defenders and 'Manichaean' for the opponents, in hopes of showing their errors.[37] Genealogies and labels were used therefore as a means of enclosing the interpretation of the definition.

33 H. Chadwick, 'Florilegium'; L. Abramowski, 'Die Streit um Diodor und Theodor zwischen den beiden ephesinischen Konzilien'.
34 Helen Sillett, 'Orthodoxy and heresy in Theodoret of Cyrus' *Compendium of heresies*'.
35 C. J. Hefele, *A history of the councils of the church*, IV: 29–365.
36 See chapter 4, above.
37 On charges against the emperor Anastasius I as 'Manichaean', see Garnsey and Humfress, *The evolution of the late antique world*, 163.

Rhetorical and political demonisation:
Pelagius and Priscillian

As often noted in recent scholarship, the construction of a heretical theological system, 'Pelagianism', for the purposes of orthodox refutation reveals an intense level of literary combat in later orthodoxy.[38] The international escalation of an ascetic controversy concerning the role of the human will in Christian living reflected not only the vigilant creativity of Augustine's thought, but also shifts in the understanding of Christian life and institutions. Pelagius' traditional teaching of a co-operative grace that necessarily included individual effort was largely commonplace in earlier Christianity and contemporary asceticism. In response to what he saw as a passive fatalism in Augustine's *Confessions*, Pelagius defended the power of human nature to be sinless in his work *On nature*. Later, reading this optimistic work together with the condemnations of the more extreme theology of Pelagius' pupil Caelestius, Augustine responded with *Nature and grace*, in which he refuted the implications of Pelagius' theology. After defending himself successfully at a synod in Diospolis in Palestine, Pelagius disappeared from historical view, but his 'system' of theology continued to be attacked by Jerome and Augustine. Two North African synods condemned theological propositions, and sent an annotated copy of *On nature* to Pope Innocent seeking his condemnation as well. Only when the theology was described as a 'secret movement' was Pelagius condemned by the emperor Honorius, and his followers expelled from Rome. Many Italian bishops objected both theologically and also politically to the power of North Africa to define orthodoxy in Rome: they declared themselves to be 'orthodox persecuted by orthodox'.[39] Augustine's theological response to Julian of Eclanum, who portrayed him as an unreformed Manichaean, was to turn from construction or speculation to the defence of the core of the tradition.[40] The demonisation and exaggeration of the teaching of Pelagius was part of a means of excluding not only actual teaching, but theological possibilities, from 'orthodoxy'.

The Western dispute over the life and teachings of Priscillian also reflected important shifts in episcopal and ascetic understanding of scriptural study and practice as well as the deadly charge of 'Manichaeism' in Christian life.[41] Since the condemnation of Manichaeans in 295 by Diocletian, the Manichaeans

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38 For what follows, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 343–6; Robert Markus, 'The legacy of Pelagius'; Löhr, 'Pelagius' Schrift *De natura*'.
39 Markus, 'The legacy of Pelagius', 215.
40 Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 396–7.
41 For what follows, see V. Burrus, *The making of a heretic*.

had been consistently persecuted and also continually successful as ascetic missionaries. Manichaeans offered a dualistic interpretation of Christianity which ultimately offended others by its docetic Christology and cosmology. Those overly interested in ascetic practice or cosmology could therefore easily acquire this polemical tag in the complex controversies of the century. Thus, the Priscillian controversy, as embracing episcopal discomfort with strict ascetic practices, association with women, and the use of apocryphal literature, lent itself to labels of 'Manichaean' or 'sorcerer'. Originating as a local dispute in Spain with his bishop Hydatius, Priscillian was rapidly demonised from an independent and private ascetic to a Manichaean and sorcerer. Convicted of these charges, he sought rehabilitation in Rome and Milan, but was refused audience by local bishops. Unfortunately, the new emperor Maximus used the controversy around Priscillian to showcase his intolerance of heresy; two trials resulted in conviction and finally execution for sorcery. Although his execution was condemned by Ambrose and Martin of Tours, the heresiological label 'Priscillianism' began to be used to represent the dangerous insider, associated with the Gnostic seducer of women. Repudiating his life and teaching became a means for ascetics such as Jerome to defend their own socially marginal lifestyles; Priscillian represented one whose speculations, perceived as magic or Manichaean, placed him beyond acceptable boundaries. The heresiarch here could be cited as a representative of dangerous or rebellious individualism that was a threat not only to public episcopal orthodoxy, but also to the structures of patriachical society itself.[42] The interpretation of contemporary institutional and theological problems by demonisation was now a literally deadly means of defeating an opponent.

Conclusion

In religious history the links between literary images and social realities are always complex, but the negative force of heresiology in Western history compounds the problem of historical interpretation. Ancient heresiology was both the literary reflection of diverse Christian communities and a dynamic force in shaping theological identity, though we must remain cautious about assuming a steady congruence or development between certain communities and definitions. The development of Christian heresiology in catalogues of errors and diptychs of saints and heretics mirrored the public expansion of the church and the legal centralisation of the empire in the fourth to sixth centuries.

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42 V. Burrus, 'The heretical woman as symbol'; H. Maier, 'The topography of heresy and dissent'.

Polemical literary categories and labels were codified by imperial legislation and classified historiographically within heresiological handbooks. The growing complexity of theological error reflected both the authoritarian society of a centralised empire and the increasing sophistication and disorder of theological debate. Ironically, the sectarian origins of Christianity created fierce local traditions that could only be negotiated into fragile unities through agreement on boundaries as much as theological centres. This tension between universality and multiplicity in Christianity made the establishment of theological and cultural boundaries through the demonic opposition of heresy all the more important. Contemporary dissent was often associated with ancient heretics in order to reinforce the sharp and eternal distinction between truth and error. Other religious traditions were given a conceptual history that placed them in a negative relation to the original and universal Christian truth. The history of these labels and classifications, however, provides important clues as to the negotiation with surrounding culture, and the resulting theological creativity, if not innovation, which is sometimes hidden by the polarising rhetoric of the polemic. Even as he prepared to write his own handbook of heresies, Augustine admitted the pastoral danger of identifying any suspect position as 'heresy'.[43] Amid the diversity of ascetic life, the varied traditions of the great Christian capitals, and individual intellectual creativity, stability was achieved through the regulation of theological thought in line with ancient revelation and the shifting of boundaries to define it. The category of 'schism' developed as a middle ground for marking significant disagreements, yet not excluding as a 'heretic'. The continuing controversies are therefore a testimony to the lasting vitality of Christian life as well as politics of power. Heresiology was not a matter of unchanging literary traditions, but rather a dynamic means of cultural assimilation, historiography and social stability.

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43 Augustine, *Ep*. 222.

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